

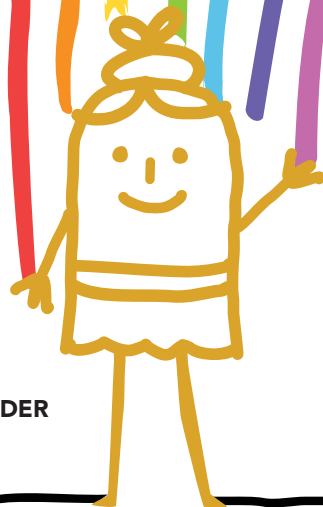
Wow Now

School Nutrition shares
(some of) the secrets of
really, *really* excellent
customer service.

YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO LOSE CUSTOMERS.

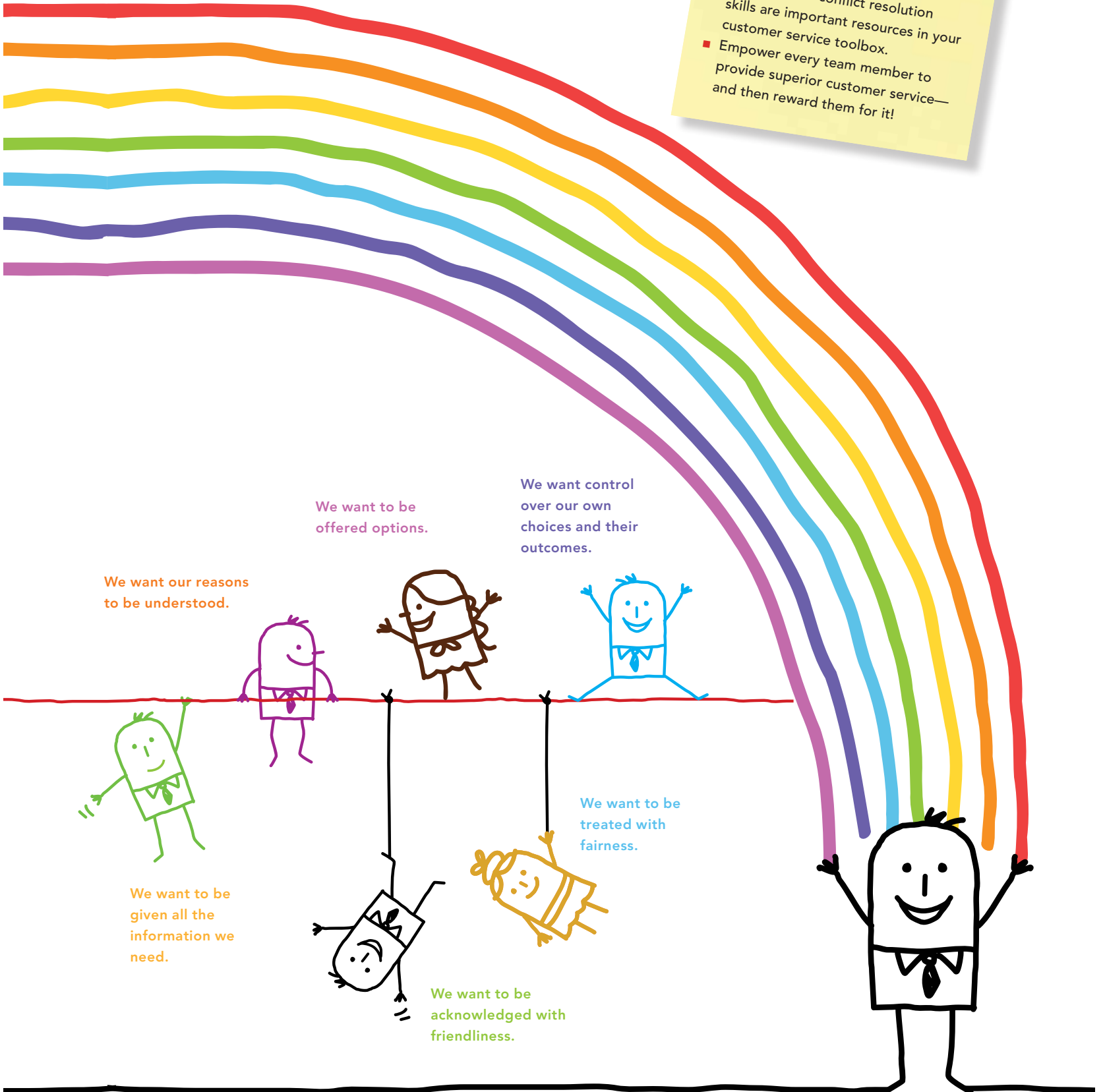
You can't afford to lose the student customer who has a choice between your cafeteria and the fastfood restaurant around the corner. You can't afford to lose the parent customer who has a choice to send her child to school with lunch money or a lunch box. You can't afford to lose the teacher or principal customer who has a choice to be a great ally or an idea-killer. You can't afford to lose the coworker customer who has the choice to work *with* you or frustrate your day. It's vital to take care of *all* of your customers, because happy customers support the school nutrition program and its goals for child nutrition and health.

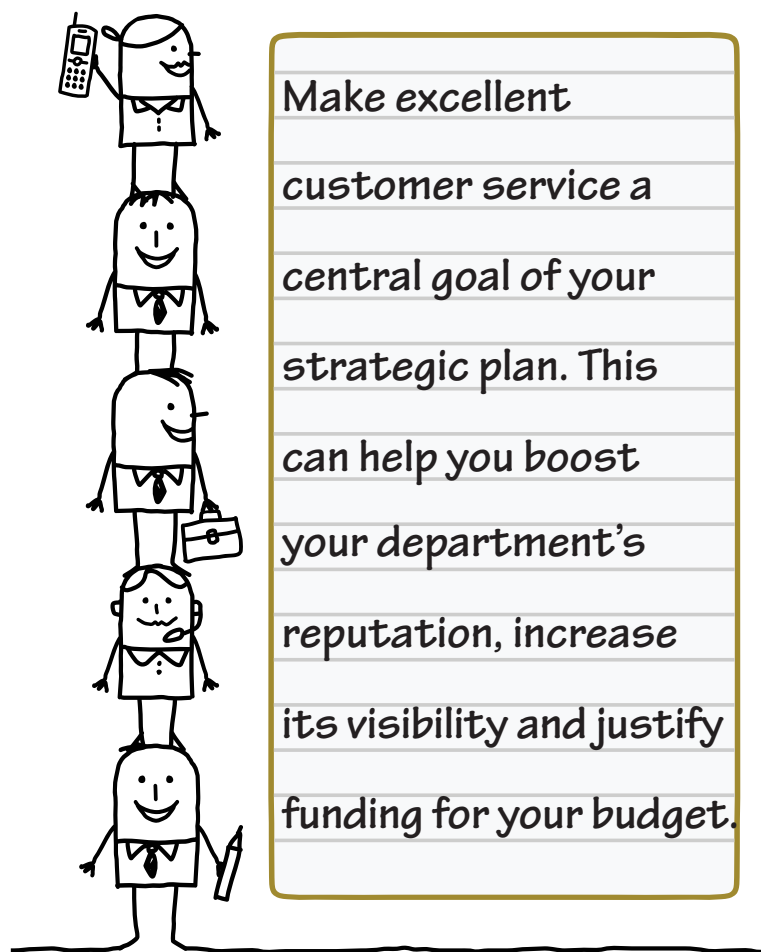
BY SUSAN DAVIS GRYDER



SNAPSHOT

- It's easier to keep the customers you have, than it is to win them over in the first place.
- Listening and conflict resolution skills are important resources in your customer service toolbox.
- Empower every team member to provide superior customer service—and then reward them for it!





Customer service is a big concept, and it crosses a wide variety of operational areas, such as marketing, staff management and even facility design. Still, planning and implementing customer service strategies doesn't have to be a complex undertaking. According to Rosa Say, a workplace culture coach in Hawaii, each of us, as someone's customer, has just six basic needs:

- We want to be acknowledged with **friendliness**.
- We want our reasons to be **understood**.
- We want to be treated with **fairness**.
- We want **control** over our own choices and their outcomes.
- We want to be offered **options**.
- We want to be given all the **information** we need.

It's easy to imagine how these fundamental needs apply to school nutrition customers! Even the youngest diner in a cafeteria appreciates friendly and fair treatment, as well as the opportunity to make choices from appealing options. All you need to do is apply these six needs to all your customers, internal and external, and you're on your way to creating a blueprint for happy cafeterias.

In this article, you will find a wide variety of tips and tricks to help you ensure excellent customer service. These include some inspiring ideas from three school nutrition directors who've made customer service a priority—and a success:

- Julie Farris, child nutrition director for Rockwall Indepen-

dent School District, a small lakeside community outside Dallas, whose low free/reduced-price eligibility percentage has gone up 4% with the downturn in the economy.

- Patsy Lynch, school nutrition director for Paulding County Schools, a suburban district outside of Atlanta that was the third-fastest-growing county in the country in 2009.

- Carolyn Watson, director of child nutrition in Montgomery (Texas) Independent School District, a system that combines rural and suburban neighborhoods and serves 6,900 children in eight schools.



Nurture Allies

Make excellent customer service **a central goal** of your strategic plan. This can help you boost your department's reputation, increase its visibility and justify funding for your budget. "In the current environment, school nutrition is being

looked at with a critical eye," says Julie Farris. "Taking care of customers creates relationships that provide a more positive view of child nutrition."

Remember that it's easier to **keep the customers you have** than it is to win new ones. School cafeterias may have a captive audience, but you still need to keep participation high by taking care not to alienate students. You want them to come back time and time again.

Patsy Lynch makes customer service **a year-round priority** by tasking her employees with a monthly customer service project. An example of a past project was a campaign in each school to identify the foodservice assistant with the friendliest customer service, followed by district-wide recognition for each school's winner.

Mind Your Manners

Much of what we think of as customer service is rooted in **basic good manners**. Still, it's up to you to make sure each staff member has a clear understanding of what's expected. Never assume that this will be second nature. In new employee training, review the basics: Look customers in the eye. Say "please." Say "thank you." Smile.

Remind everyone on the team of one important but oft-forgotten rule: **Never complain within earshot**. Nothing creates a worse impression than a customer who can hear employees



complaining about their jobs, the food, their boss and so on. Give employees more constructive channels to express concerns and vent frustrations; these might include a dedicated time for such sharing at staff meetings, comment boxes and employee surveys. Managers should be trained not only to observe staff interactions, but also to correct bad attitudes and behaviors in a timely but appropriate fashion (e.g. not in front of students, teachers or parents).

Customer service training, especially for managers, should address the importance of developing **listening and conflict resolution skills**. Role-play difficult situations and scenarios, such as the call from an irate parent whose child didn't get her preferred entrée choice because there were none left by the time she came through the line. Role-playing helps managers and other employees anticipate problems and become more comfortable in dealing with difficult situations and people. Then, when a crisis does arise, team members can call upon the techniques they've practiced to lower emotional temperatures and get to the heart of the matter: Solving the problem.

Does **everyone feel welcome** when they walk in the door? Lynch has established a "Greet and Eat" program, based on the notion that everyone who walks into the cafeteria should be individually greeted and made welcome. "This idea started last year," Lynch recounts. "One of my staff members went to a school to eat, and stood in the serving line for five minutes before the food assistant lifted up her head and said hello." Now, Lynch trains all of her staff to greet customers quickly and with genuine warmth.

Carolyn Watson trains staff to use the point-of-sale system to help make kids feel welcome. The screen shows students' pictures, which makes it easier for cashiers to learn to call them by their names.



Great Expectations

Never accept a less-than-a-happy customer. Do everything you can to ensure that problems are at least addressed, if not resolved. Make this philosophy a priority and part of your thinking every day, in every

way. Watson embraces a particular **customer service mantra** that she loves: "Set your sights on delight." All new practices, menu items, activities and so on are planned and implemented with the idea of "delight" in mind.

Words have tremendous power, and the "right" one can make all the difference in influencing attitudes and actions. For example, Julie Farris suggests changing the emphasis from customer service to customer care. The word "care" arguably imparts a more positive, productive feeling than "service."

Still, the quality of your customer service is only as good as

the quality of your employees. This means ensuring that customer service goals are paramount at the start of a new year or a new working relationship. Keep customer service in mind when hiring, training and evaluating all employees. To get off on the right foot, raise some customer service "what ifs" when interviewing potential new hires. Be sure to note whether the answers give you that warm, fuzzy feeling.

Watson believes that customer expectations influence the way they feel about a cafeteria's **food and ambiance—and vice versa**. "A clean, upbeat, appealing atmosphere raises student expectations from the minute they walk in," she notes. That's why she is always reviewing a cafeteria's décor, making sure it's bright and compelling, with plenty of textures.

"Have a **plan**; work your plan." That's Patsy Lynch's approach to ensuring that her customer service initiatives get off the ground and create results. She knows that it's not enough to say you have a customer service plan: It has to be put into action. "Working your plan means a lot of training and a lot of follow-up," she says. "That's the key in our system."

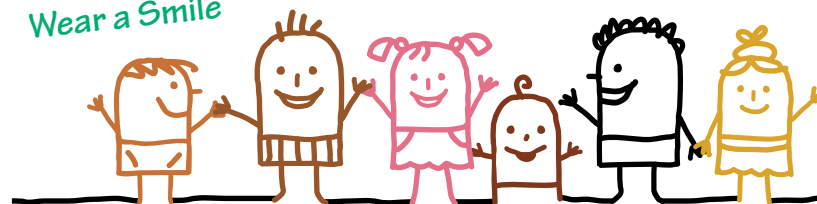
We're Customers, Too!

Ensuring that your district or school team is staffed with **happy employees** is an important customer service goal. After all, Watson acknowledges, "It's hard to smile as an employee if you're unhappy with your job!" She combats employee dissatisfaction with clear job descriptions, finely tuned schedules to avoid situations where absences require workers to cover for one another and plenty of staff development and training.

Apply branding techniques and principles to help employees maintain their customer service focus after training and back in their own schools. Some districts establish **branded themes** to reinforce the messages of different training topics. For example, to promote customer service, Farris asks her school nutrition team to "Leap into Customer Care!" The slogan is paired with a cute, memorable frog mascot—and it's not only shared with employees, but with students and the community at large, so that all see the value the school nutrition department places on meeting customer needs. Managers at individual cafeterias create unique names and personalities for the frogs and use them in lunchroom décor and promotional materials.

Empower every member of your staff to provide excellent customer service. "We need to be ready to respond to changes,

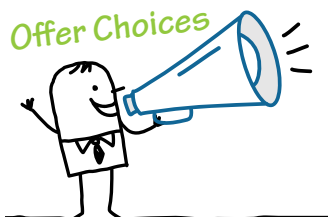
Wear a Smile



field requests from parents, work with committees ... I can't do it all," concedes Farris. "My entire staff needs to be ready to deliver our message professionally and consistently."

Catch your employees modeling good customer service behavior and **reward them** for it! Throughout the year, Patsy Lynch's district managers issue Golden Apple certificates to employees practicing superior customer service. "We try to send them no later than the day after the excellent customer service is observed. Schools are taking this as a competition—everyone's talking about it!" she reports.

Offer Choices



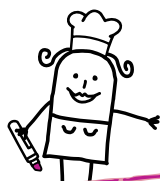
Catering to Culture

Good customer service includes providing **adequate choices** for students who have strong preferences for specific kinds of foods, such as vegetarian or pork-free or familiar regional specialties. And

in many communities, this includes offering culturally appropriate meals.

Know which languages the parents in your community are likely to speak, and research options for translation (to provide menus in those languages) or interpretation (if parents want to speak with you but aren't comfortable doing so in English); many districts subscribe to over-the-phone interpreting services that are available in numerous languages. In training, review the **cultural preferences, traditions and customs** of parents in your district. For example, some parents may expect more formality during a conversation.

And remember that your employees and coworkers—your most important internal customers—also may come from a variety of cultures. It may prove helpful if training includes a review of cultural customs that might affect working relationships and on-the-job needs. For example, is the team sensitive to religious and cultural holidays, observances and practices that affect employee schedules?



Be Creative

Be Inventive

Explore creative ways to bring **professional customer service training** to your staff. You say you don't have the financial resources to hire a full-time trainer? Think out of the box. One reason that Julie Farris can afford a staff trainer is that she "lends" this employee to a dozen other small districts in the area, charging for time and travel. "Our trainer provides Level One training, but also

can do custom training or focus on a certain customer service area. This arrangement allows us to keep our trainer, and it gives other districts this benefit, too," she explains.

R-e-a-c-h for It Bring the community into your cafeteria.

"We get out into our community and empower managers to try things on their campuses because they know their kids best," says

Farris. For example, "One campus is partnering with the library to have 'Lunch With Someone You Love,' in conjunction with the school book fair."

Survey creatively. Lynch relies on feedback from all customers, and regularly surveys students, faculty and her own staff. "Sometimes [respondents] are brutally honest," she concedes. "But you have to know what's not working. I like to have our training specialists go out at least once a week and eat





Dutchess

Bakers' Machinery Company
302 Grand Avenue, Superior, WI 54880

MODEL 270

French Bread, Bun
& Bagel Slicer





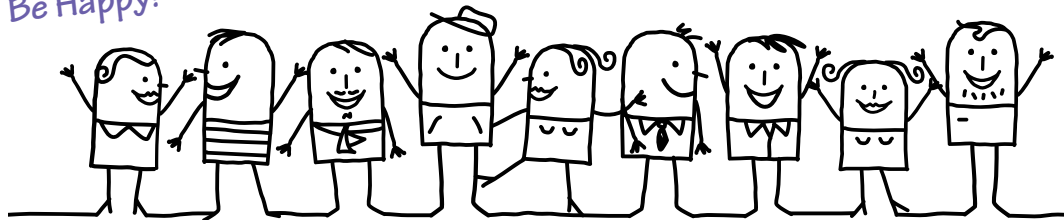


SINCE 1886

- Slices Hamburger & Coney Buns, Bagels, Subs & Hogies, French Bread and More!
- Stainless Steel Food Contact Areas
- Easy Adjustments - Minimal Training
- Product Chute Easily Removed for Cleaning
- Fast, Accurate and Safe Operation

For Information or Literature Call: 1-800-777-4498
www.dutchessbakers.com
 e-mail: sales@dutchessbakers.com

Be Happy!



*Gingerbread Cookies...
A Traditional Holiday Treat*

FIELDSTONE BAKERY

**\$1/case
holiday
promotion**

Available on
Gingerbread
Cookies

10 case minimum

Call for details

1-800-251-6346
ext. 24656

The Gingerbread Cookie

Only 7g Sugar
15g Carbs
0g Trans Fat
.74 oz/144 ct case
Equals 1/2 bread
Individually Wrapped
Meets 30/10/35 guidelines

Fieldstone Bakery
Individually Wrapped Snacks

Gingerbread Cookies
Spins - pecan
Fig Bars
Fruit Delights - apple or strawberry
Crispy Rice Bars
Nutty Buddy - wafer bars
Creme Filled Fudge Cookies
Oatmeal Cookies with Creme
Strawberry Fruit & Grain Bars
Oatmeal Raisin Multigrain Bars
Granola Cereal Packets
Bulk Granola Cereals

www.fieldstonebakery.com

McKee **FIELDSTONE**

breakfast or lunch at a school. They sit down with the kids and talk to them, asking them how things are going, what could be better, etc.” The training specialists can incorporate what they’ve learned into the next round of staff training, says Lynch.

Lynch and her team also are mindful about getting feedback from those who *aren’t* customers. They make a point to talk with the “lunchbox” students: “I want to find out what we can do to bring them in to eat with us!”

Finally, in these difficult economic times, make an extra effort to reach out to **those less fortunate** in your community; some may need your help now more than ever. “Some of the parents in our district grew up affluent and now have no job,” reports Farris. “Many of them don’t know that the free-and-reduced-price program even exists, but now they need it.” She makes a point to stay in contact with religious leaders in her community, asking them to post information about the school meal program and encourage their congregants to apply if they are in need.

Don’t Worry, Be Happy

Customer service: It’s part marketing, part staff development, part communication. It can make or break the success of your operation, influencing student participation, community support and budget allocation. Be creative, be exceptional, be inclusive—and keep your eyes on the prize: Happy customers, ready to eat. **SN**

Susan Davis Gryder is a freelance writer in Silver Spring, Md. Illustrations by **NLshop/istockphoto.com**.

TO YOUR CREDIT: For CEUs toward SNA certification, complete the “To Your Credit” test on page 54.